



*Chosen to Lead
Washington's Child Welfare System*

Meet **Uma Ahluwalia**

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UMA AHLUWALIA
ASSISTANT SECRETARY
CHILDREN’S ADMINISTRATION

Uma Ahluwalia, 36, a former Washington D. C. child welfare manager, became assistant secretary for the Department of Social and Health Services’ (DSHS) Children’s Administration on Sept. 8.

Most recently, she served as director of external affairs with the Child and Family Services Agency in Washington, D.C., and has much expertise in federal programs and in working with executive and legislative branches of state government.

“I’m very excited about this opportunity to work in Washington’s social service organization,” said Ahluwalia. “Washington’s child welfare system isn’t broken and isn’t in crisis, but as in all systems, there is room for improvement.”

Ahluwalia also served as acting assistant chief of staff in the Maryland governor’s office, as the governor’s policy liaison for health and human services, and as deputy director for Child, Adult and Family Services with Prince George’s County (Maryland) Department of Human Resources.

Focus on DSHS Kids Come First Action Agenda

Ahluwalia will continue to build on DSHS Secretary Dennis Braddock’s successful Kids Come First Action Agenda, which has played a leading role in the accreditation of eight children’s services offices by the International Council on Accreditation, which sets the highest standard for child welfare practices.

During her tenure at Prince George’s County, that department earned accreditation status.

She also looks forward to the federal Child and Family Services Review in November 2003. The review will determine if children and parents are well served through DSHS programs that provide child protective, foster care and adoption services.

“The department has an excellent opportunity to determine our strengths and weakness and use the federal process for improving our child welfare system,” said Ahluwalia.

The new assistant secretary also is a strong supporter of efforts underway to provide services tailored to meet individual needs by working in partnership with communities and neighborhoods.

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Ahluwalia holds master's degrees in social work from the University of Delhi, India, and in health administration from George Washington University.

Challenges We Face

"The level of support from the Legislature and the Governor's Office for children's services in Washington is remarkable," Ahluwalia said. "We need to sustain that support during difficult economic times in order to continue with accreditation and other improvements to child welfare system."

She also said the department is doing a good job of sustaining current levels of foster homes through the success of its recruitment program (the department is recruiting new foster homes to replace the ones that close), but the retention rate needs to improve in order to increase the overall number of foster homes.

She also said the department needs to continue improving relationships with foster parents.

Another ongoing challenge is to help the public better understand the child welfare system. The department has begun that process with a new law that allows open court hearings involving children who are removed from or returned to their parents' homes.

"We need to engage the community and our multiple stakeholders in keeping children safe in permanent homes where the children's well-being is uppermost," she said.

Another challenge is a Whatcom County Superior Court injunction, requiring DSHS to make significant changes in its foster care system. That injunction is on appeal to the Washington Supreme Court. The case is known as Braam v. State or the multiple placement lawsuit.

"Multiple disruptions in foster care placements are detrimental to good outcomes for children," Ahluwalia said. "We recognize this and have identified many improvements. Washington is doing well on this federal outcome measure, with 91 percent of our children having less than three placements in a given 12-month period."